

AFTER THE NORTH BAY WILDFIRES - CONVERSATIONS WITH PRG CLIENTS REPORT #1, JAN. 2018

PRG contacted current and former clients in Sonoma County immediately after the October 2017 fires.

We offered consultation and a sounding board on issues that may impact their fundraising and overall fiscal well-being.

Among many sobering concerns revealed by these 11 agencies, here are the most common, along with opportunities we have identified.



Ruben Arquilevich, ED at URJ Camp Newman, views fire damage.

Nonprofits as responders

In the aftermath of the fires, two agency categories emerged:

- **Those recognized for a basic disaster recovery mission** – agencies such as Redwood Empire Food Bank and Catholic Charities tend to have the connections, donor base and visibility to be effective. Their donor pool will become very crowded, competitive and fatigued.
- **Agencies not primarily involved in tasks of recovery** – these organizations are finding it more difficult to respond to donor questions and potential fatigue. Some agencies are less financially secure, lack high profile visibility and have a slender base of individual donors. They may not have developed the stewardship capability needed to connect with and retain those donors.

Clearly the impact of the fires is equally profound on both kinds of agencies. Their staff and board members lost homes, their clients are traumatized and their operations are disrupted.

Opportunities

Recovery will demand rebuilding, healing and re-imagining. The agencies not directly tied to disaster relief or rebuilding need help developing a new case for support.

Their messaging must connect their services to the healing challenges, such as serving the needs of traumatized kids, displaced families, the disabled and seniors, and neighborhood rebuilding.

They play an important role as second responders, dealing with the psychological aspects of recovery and the healing dimension of the recovery effort. There is and will be a yearning for normalcy and these agencies can play a significant role in the restoration of the torn community fabric.

Leveling the recovery playing field

The first wave of philanthropy, like Redwood Credit Union's Fire Relief Fund, has functioned as triage. The goal was to get money to individual fire victims as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Now that many emergency needs have been met, a second wave of philanthropy will focus on recovery. Maintaining equity and balance in distributing charitable funds over the long recovery period is a major concern.

This worry was voiced by every agency with whom we spoke. Among their questions:

- Will funds be directed to the most vulnerable and those with the least resources?
- Will the process of distribution be transparent?
- What are the ground rules—who is making these decisions on behalf of the community and who is advising them on these decisions?
- Will agencies be forced to compete with homeowners, neighborhoods and businesses for an inevitably shrinking pool of funds?
- How can recovery unify rather than divide the community?

Opportunities

Nonprofits would be well-served to come together as a sector and unify their concerns and voices. There are many opportunities for partnerships among the faith-based organizations, local school PTAs and other affected groups. The nonprofit community in Sonoma County has great political, economic and creative strength, but only as a collective.

Redefining vulnerable

As reported in the *Press Democrat* (11/2/17), Santa Rosa's homeless encampments have already begun to swell. This new homeless population can be described as:

- renters who've lost jobs and can't find affordable housing (some of whom were living on a shoestring before the fires)
- low income
- disabled
- chronically-disadvantaged people who lost their housing
- the uninsured
- people suffering from mental health issues caused by the fires
- other displaced folks with no resources



This group of newly homeless will continue to grow, placing enormous strain on nonprofit agencies and the County's services.

Senior adults were disproportionately affected by the disaster, also making up the bulk of fatalities. Many had moved here from outside Sonoma County, selecting the area as a desirable retirement location.

Now an untold number of these retirees have been displaced, left with no local family support. Many are emotionally fragile, living on fixed incomes, confused by this disruption and often facing health issues.

Hunger, homelessness and isolation are nothing new to Sonoma County. The disaster is swelling these ranks and redefining who is now vulnerable.

Opportunities

An emerging coalition of homeless-serving agencies and a similar collective of senior adult-serving providers (including the COA) should lead in responding to the growing number of homeless, as well as advocating for seniors. The creation of new, affordable, permanent housing in this rebuilding period is an opportunity on everybody's minds.

Many service providers are now coordinating their resources. Although these are largely uncharted waters, collaboration can provide rapid, life-saving disaster response through responsible, efficient community planning. However, this is complex. The community expects rapid response to the needs of the new homeless while ensuring that the voice of the disenfranchised is heard during the recovery phase.

Displacement

Client partners fear that temporary displacement will become permanent. Some residents have already left Sonoma County because they can't afford to reestablish their lives or find reasonable rental housing. Others are leaving because the specter of rebuilding homes or restarting lives is simply too emotionally difficult. Anecdotal evidence, for example, shows an out-migration of physicians has already begun.

Implications

So far, it's impossible to quantify the scope of medium-term or permanent displacement. But a brain drain and loss of workforce, especially in lower-paid industries that unfortunately includes many nonprofits, will reverberate throughout the region.

For nonprofits, displacement has profound implications. Much of their workforce is younger, low-wage and mission-driven. Staff shortages will be particularly difficult at a time when service demands will increase. A decrease in client census due to displacement will also cause a loss of earned income for some providers.

Communal empathy

The firestorm did not discriminate between the wealthy and poor. Some who were evacuated from million-dollar homes were forced to spend time in a shelter with just the clothes they were wearing, experiencing for the first time the reality of homelessness and the shame of dependency. The press carried story after story about people of means living in shelters with the underprivileged.



Memories of these experiences may foster new empathy and compassion among individuals as they rebuild their lives and retain a residual appreciation for what it really means to be homeless. Nearly everyone in the county has a personal connection to someone directly affected by the fire.

Opportunities

As the shock from this disaster recedes and the more fortunate begin to rebuild their lives, for many the experience of loss is permanent.

Being homeless, nearly homeless or hungry is not confined to the aftermath of a fire. However, this visceral experience

this visceral experience among those who were otherwise comfortable presents an opportunity. Agencies can capture their stories and preserve them as part of community awareness, and more importantly, as an opportunity for donor stewardship.

Wave of giving

The outpouring of donations has been phenomenal. Recipients include the RCU-North Bay Fire Relief Fund, Community Foundation Sonoma County Resilience Fund, Tipping Point, UndocuFund, dozens of smaller funds and directly to the front-line agencies. Much of this initial giving is directly assisting fire victims, first responders and displaced residents and students.

Donors outside of the county have made substantial and often, first-time gifts to both funds and agencies. Some estimates are that more than \$200 million in charitable gifts have been received in the wake of the disaster.

Opportunities

The principal concern expressed by agency leaders is how to sustain these new sources of giving. What happens after the inevitable donor fatigue sets in, when the large disaster-response funds have been depleted and the fires' aftermath no longer occupies the headlines?

All projections for at least the next few years point to increased need and much greater demands on service providers. Some agencies were already facing decreased state and federal funding and are likely to be scrambling for workers.

There is widespread consensus that the recovery and rebuilding phases will benefit by major funding sources coordinating their allocations efforts.

Organizations with fund development capacity have the ability and systems to steward donors, existing and new, and apply standard best-practices that can incentivize ongoing, multi-year gifts.

Smaller agencies with little or no fund development infrastructure will likely struggle with keeping donors informed and engaged. These organizations would benefit from fund development capacity-building assistance along with funding for recovery efforts. A collective strategy aimed at retaining these large, new investors in Sonoma County's nonprofits, would be a smart, strategic effort with benefits for all.

There is likewise a sense of North-Bay-as-one. Marin County residents and agencies were particularly responsive to and impacted by the disaster. One wonders if a new day is at hand in the coming together of these geographical partners.

Fragmentation vs. collaboration

We heard countless stories of agencies and their staffs coming to the aid of one another during the fire and since.

Still, many organizations have understandably been internally- focused in the weeks since the fires. They're relocating facilities, moving staff to respond to emerging crises, trying to support suddenly homeless employees and reaching out to displaced clients.

As the recovery period unfolds, undoubtedly it will bring greater scrutiny about how funds are being used. We anticipate that donors (and the greater public) will be sensitive to perceived agency silos and any apparent conflicts over turf and funding.

Against this backdrop, insightful donors will be more inclined to support the agencies tangibly engaged in collaboration. It makes sense to leverage their collective resources, especially at a time when Sonoma Strong is a prominent rallying cry.

We heard many collaboration ideas:

- a multi-agency benefit gala in lieu of each agency's individual, annual event
- training a cross-agency workforce to assemble modular homes
- multi-agency teams supporting those in homeless encampments
- artists, social workers and therapists bringing a healing arts program into schools

Opportunities

It would be wise to document how agencies came together toward the greater good during and immediately after the fire. This serves as proof that a willing, capable and compassionate network of service providers care most about community well-being.

Ideas about how to make cross-agency efforts a more permanent part of the area's service fabric should be encouraged and publicized. We believe that this would be welcome news to donors and clients who would benefit from more streamlined service delivery. Easier said than done but there is more fertile ground for these conversations than ever before.

Download PRG's Report #2, [North Bay Wildfires' Impact on Sonoma County Nonprofits and Their Fundraising – PRG'S Report #2, Feb. 2018](#)